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Survey Explores Ways To Heal Rift Between Liberals, Conservatives

PRINCETON, N.J. – Some observers of the religious scene maintain that one of the most worrisome developments in contemporary Christianity is the wide rift between liberal and conservative Christians. They point out that while considerable headway has been made in *interfaith* efforts – reaching out to *non-Christians* – relatively little has been done in trying to bring about reconciliation between the two wings in Christianity.

A new survey, published here for the first time with the kind permission of its sponsor, *The Robert H. Schuller Ministries*, extensively probes the differences and similarities between Christians on the left and those on the right – in beliefs, practices, attitudes, outlook, and the like – and examines steps that might be taken to heal the rift and thus create a stronger and more vital church with a united witness to mankind.

The examination of steps that could be taken to bring the two wings of Christianity together is based, not on the assumption that a consensus of religious views and behavior should be forged – indeed, different approaches add greatly to the vitality of the church – but on the assumption that Christians should be of one accord at all levels in their efforts to carry out their mission.

The study shed light on these questions:

- What are the dimensions of disagreement and tension between the left and right?
- What do survey respondents see as the major reasons for the differences?
- Do Americans think that greater understanding between conservative and liberal Christians would be desirable or undesirable? What efforts are presently being undertaken to bring this about?
- What steps can be taken to bring the left and right together?

The study is based on in-person interviews with 1,522 adults, 18 and older, conducted in more than 300 scientifically selected localities across the nation in June, 1984.

Following is an overview of the findings:

What are the dimensions of disagreement and tension between the left *and the* right?

The study offers ample evidence of a serious rift among Americans, between those whose religious views can be described as liberal and those whose views can be classified as conservative, in terms of: perceived disagreements, the nature of contacts, images, perceptions of the degree of influence of the two groups in various areas, and ratings of liking or disliking.

1. As many as 45% of survey respondents believe there are "serious disagreements" among churchgoers on basic questions, while fewer, 35%, believe that churchgoers generally agree on these questions.

The views of liberals, moderates and conservatives are similar on this issue.

Those in the total sample who say there are serious disagreements most often cite: (1) church doctrine, belief or practice, (2) abortion, (3) church and state, (4) interpretation of the Bible, (5) lifestyles, and (6) views on morality.

2. Six in 10 (60%) of survey respondents believe there is "quite a lot" or a "fair amount" of tension between people with conservative religious views and people with liberal religious views.

This view is shared by liberals, moderates and conservatives.

3. While 44% of survey respondents say their contacts with *conservatives* have been mostly pleasant, 49% say "mixed" and another 5% "mostly unpleasant."

Among those in the survey who are classified as "liberals," 33% say "mostly pleasant," while 58% say "mixed" and 6% "mostly unpleasant."

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Contact with Liberals

A total of 40% of the total sample say their contact with *liberals* has been "mostly pleasant," while 55% say "mixed" and 3% "mostly unpleasant."

Among those in the survey who classify themselves as "conservatives," 38% say "mostly pleasant," while 55% say "mixed" and 3% "mostly unpleasant."

4. In terms of their public image, *conservatives* are often viewed negatively as "overly strict on moral issues," "close-minded," "intolerant of other religious views," "fanatical about their beliefs," "too harsh an emphasis on guilt, sin or judgement," "too concerned about their own salvation," and "too rigid and simplistic."

Liberals, in turn, are often viewed as "substituting social concerns for the true gospel," "too compromising with the world," "morally loose," "having a shallow knowledge of the Bible," and "too much influenced by secular humanism."

5. More than one-fifth of the total sample say people with conservative religious views have too much power among religious leaders on television, among national religious agencies, and in schools.

More than one-fifth think people with liberal religious views have too much power in the mass media, in government, and in the schools.

What do survey respondents see as the major reasons for the differences?

The five major reasons the public sees for the difference between conservative and liberal Christians are: "the ways in which people were raised," "basic religious beliefs," "social issues," "self-image" and "styles of worship."

In the table at the bottom of this page are the percentages (ranked from highest to lowest nationally) saying the 11 items tested are a "major reason" for the difference, with the views of liberals, moderates, and conservatives compared.

Do Americans think that greater understanding between conservative and liberal Christians would be desirable or undesirable? What efforts are presently being undertaken to bring this about?

Despite the serious areas of disagreement and tension between the "left" and the "right" in public perceptions, two-thirds (68%) feel that greater understanding between conservatives and liberal Christians would be desirable. Only 8% feel that it would not, while 24% don't express an opinion.

At present, however, only one person in six (16%) is actively involved in bringing about greater understanding among different groups of Christians. These activities most often include personal contacts, church gatherings, working together on committees, involvement in youth programs, participating in school classes or groups, through visitation programs, and working in ecumenical groups.

What do survey respondents themselves think are ways to bring the left and the right together? What other steps are suggested by the survey findings?

1. The public feels that the following would be most helpful in promoting greater understanding: constructive face-to-face discussion; taking more time to understand each other's views; getting to know each other better; meeting together; studying the Bible together; compromise.

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MAJOR REASONS FOR DIFFERENCES

	National	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
	%	%	%	%
The ways in which people were raised	59	71	60	64
Basic religious beliefs	55	55	60	64
Differences on social issues	41	47	45	43
Self-image	39	45	43	36
Styles of worship	35	35	37	41
Historical differences	34	38	38	30
Differences in personality	29	35	34	23
Choice of words to express beliefs	29	33	31	30
Levels of education	27	34	29	26
Differences in cultural tastes	22	24	24	22
Mannerisms of speech and dress	15	17	16	17

2. Another way to improve relations between the "left" and the "right" would be to encourage persons in both wings to make a greater effort to try to understand the teaching and traditions of other denominations as well as their own. Only 12% of survey respondents say they have spent a "great deal" of time in such pursuits – 15% of liberals, 10% of moderates and 14% of conservatives. Only one-third of Americans (32%) say they have spent a great deal of time trying to understand the teachings and traditions of their *own* denomination. Among conservatives the figure is 46% while the proportion among moderates is 32% and among liberals, 30%. (IMPORTANT NOTE: In the June issue of Emerging Trends, sociologist Dr. Robert Wuthnow, in a special article based on the survey, points out that closer contact between the "left" and the "right" does not appear to reduce religious prejudice. At the same time, however, it should be borne in mind that closer contact usually results in persons becoming more keenly aware of the differences among religious groups, and in this respect could increase the possibility of negative feelings. Still closer contact, however, and greater awareness of the other person's perspective, could, presumably, reduce religious prejudice in the long run.)

3. When asked which ways they would like to see their own local churches reach out to other churches, the responses given most often are, by conservatives, moderates and liberals alike, "meeting together to work on community projects"; "joining in projects to bring about reconciliation and understanding among people of different racial backgrounds"; and "encouraging interdenominational youth and campus groups, such as Young Life, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship."

Conservatives and liberals differ fairly markedly on the need to "join in efforts to bring non-Christians or nominal Christians to a love of Christ," yet there is, nevertheless, considerable agreement among the three groups on the desirability of this step.

Very few among each of the three groups – conservatives, moderates, and liberals – fail to choose any of the 15 items tested.

Other steps suggested by the survey findings:

4. Build upon areas of agreement (volunteered by survey respondents who say churchgoers generally agree on basic questions). These areas include: "being kind and helping the needy"; "belief in Jesus Christ"; and a shared belief in the "need for world peace."

5. Build upon the commonality in viewpoints on many issues. A large majority of all three groups, for example, favor prayer in public schools, although moderates and liberals are somewhat less enthusiastic than conservatives in their support of this measure.

6. Build upon the commonality of goals. Comparable proportions of liberals, moderates and conservatives say that a top priority of Christians is to "concentrate on the spiritual growth of one's family and self."

7. Build upon the commonality in views on the outlook for Christianity in the U.S. Large majorities of conservatives, moderates and liberals are optimistic about the outlook for Christianity in the U.S. during the next 20 years, although conservatives are more likely to be "very optimistic" than their counterparts.

8. Build upon the commonalities in basic beliefs. Some of the sharpest differences among the three groups are found in levels of belief, particularly in terms of *intensity* of belief. At the same time, however, large majorities of conservatives, moderates and liberals feel that God loves them, that they have a personal relationship with God, consider themselves to be Christians, feel prayer is important – and perhaps most importantly, feel that it is important to grow into a deeper relationship with God.

Perhaps among the most worrisome findings, from the point of view of ecumenists, are those that show only 23% of liberals and 37% of moderates, compared to 59% of conservatives, saying it is "very important to bring Christians together."

9. Build upon the commonality of religious interests. A total of 34% of conservatives, 18% of moderates and 12% of liberals report involvement in home Bible study. In addition, 6% of conservatives, 6% of moderates and 4% of liberals are involved in positive thinking seminars. In terms of group therapy, 4% of conservatives, 6% of moderates, and 3% of liberals say they are involved in this activity.

10. Explore the possibility that some of the tension and misunderstanding between the "right" and the "left" may be due to confusing *substance* with style. For example, while relatively few in the survey feel that "mannerisms of speech and dress" are a major reason for the difference between conservative and liberal Christians, only 26% say it is not a reason at all.

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11. Examine the problem of terminology. Certain basic terms appear to have different meanings for different denominations or faiths. For example, only 17% of Catholics say they have been "born again" or have had a "born again experience," yet 93% of Catholics consider themselves Christians.

12. Encourage national leaders to meet together. Since few national meetings, apparently, include leaders who represent the broad spectrum of religious leaders, it would be worthwhile to encourage such meetings. In addition, some support in the survey is found for a new national ecumenical organization that would include both conservative and liberal Christians as members.

13. Develop religious television programs to appeal to the broad spectrum of Christians. Conservatives, moderates and liberals alike would like to see religious television programs give high priority to "practical steps" – how to live a Christian life; how to pray; how to read the Bible; what does being a Christian mean?

Other categories selected frequently by all three groups (from a list of 15 items) are "testimonies of persons who have brought peace and understanding to the community"; and "discussions of theology." Sharp differences in responses are found in the desirability of "encouraging viewers to pray together while watching programs," "reporting news from a religious perspective," and sermons.

Notes on Interpreting The Survey Findings

- Survey results are based on the total sample. A total of 85% of survey respondents give specific Christian religious preferences, while 82% of the sample say they consider themselves to be Christians.

- Religious ideology: To determine the religious ideology of survey respondents, each person was asked to use a six-point scale to describe his or her religious views. Categories one and two were combined for "conservatives" (18%), three and four for "moderates" (47%) and five and six for "liberals" (19%). Another 16% did not respond to this question.

- Evangelicals and non-evangelicals: Evangelicals must fulfill three criteria: have had a "born again" conversion experience, believe the Bible to be the actual Word of God, and have tried to encourage other people to accept Jesus Christ in their lives. About one person in five (21%), using this definition, is an evangelical. All others are considered non-evangelicals.

Americans Donated $37 Billion To Religious Organizations in '85

As reported in GIVING USA (a publication of the AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy), Americans donated $37.7 billion to religious organizations and agencies in 1985, a new record and an increase of 6.5% from the $34.4 billion donated a year earlier.

In 1985, contributions to religious organizations accounted for 47.3% of all philanthropic donations during the year, slightly below the 48.3% in 1984.

Giving to religion, the Association said, has been nearly half of total philanthropy every year and varies only by a few points each year – depending for the most part on the volume and value of large gifts and bequests to other philanthropic categories such as education, health and culture.

It is generally believed that as much as 22% of all religious giving is eventually spent by churches and synagogues for social service purposes and, in heavily populated Catholic areas, nearly 30% of all contributions is funneled into church-run schools and colleges.

ALCOHOL USE AND ABUSE IN AMERICA

The clergy of America are on the "front line" of dealing with alcoholism and alcohol abuse in our society. A new 76-page Gallup Report, *Alcohol Use and Abuse in America*, will help you minister to alcoholics and their families by providing answers to such questions as :

- What do Americans know and not know about alcoholism?
- What are their perceptions and misconceptions?
- How many homes are afflicted by alcohol-related problems?
- What steps do people think should be taken to deal with alcoholism and alcohol abuse – and how willing are they, themselves, to further such efforts?

How to Order: Send $65.00 for up to 4 copies, $45.00 for 5 or more, to: The Gallup Organization, Inc. Attn: CM, P.O. Box 628, Princeton, New Jersey 08542.

Survey Explores Impact of Religion On Views Toward Self, Other People

Eight in 10 Americans (85%) report that their religious beliefs help them to respect and assist other people, while 83% say they lead them to respect people of other religions.

Almost as many (82%) claim that their religious beliefs and values help them to respect themselves.

These findings, from a survey conducted for *The Reader's Digest* by *The Gallup Organization* (published in the May 1986 issue), offer evidence of the power of the religious dynamic in American life.

The survey also shows 63% stating that their beliefs "keep me from doing things I know I shouldn't do," and, interestingly, 14% say their beliefs "lead me to believe mine is the only true religion." Only 4% report that their beliefs have little or no effect on their lives.

The survey is based on in-person interviews with 1,540 adults, 18 and older, conducted in June 1985, and sought to determine:

- How Americans feel their religious beliefs and values affect their lives.
- Americans' involvement in religious activities.
- The proportion of Americans who have had important religious experiences or revelations.
- The proportion who have had important prayers answered.
- The circumstances in which Americans pray.

Here are some of the other key findings:

Involvement in Religious Activities

The survey found that 76% of the nation's adults attend religious services; 38% say they do so regularly, 31% occasionally and 7% only on holy days.

A significantly higher proportion of women (45%) than men (30%) report they regularly attend church or synagogue.

Age is strongly related to regular attendance at religious services. Persons 65 and older are twice as likely to attend services regularly as are those under the age of 30 (56% vs 27%).

Currently, one-third of Americans (34%) claim that they give money to or work for charities associated with a church or synagogue. The figure rises to 47% among college graduates, and 51% among persons from households with incomes of more than $50,000 annually.

While a relatively small proportion claim to attend religious study groups (13%), these are clearly a core group of intensely involved individuals: of this group, 78% attend religious services regularly, and 78% are involved with religious charities.

Religious Experiences, Revelations

Nearly four in 10 Americans (38%) claim to have had important religious experiences or revelations that reinforced their faith.

Such religious experiences are far more likely to be reported by Protestants (45%) than by Catholics (28%) and by women (44%) than by men (31%).

Prayers Answered

A total of 70% of the nation's adults report that there have been times in their lives when they felt important prayers were answered. Once again, gender is an important factor: 81% of women compared with 58% of men claim important prayers had been answered.

It is interesting to note that of those who regularly attend religious services, 90% feel that important prayers were answered.

Prayer Situations, Circumstances

When respondents were asked about the circumstances under which they pray, 61% say they pray alone in their home. Thirty-three percent say they sometimes pray at work or at school and only 8% report that they seldom or never pray outside a formal place of worship.

The highest incidence of praying at home is reported by women (72%) and by those 65 years and older (75%).

Nearly half of survey respondents (47%) say they turn to prayer when they are worried, facing challenges or in danger. Most likely to pray under these circumstances are women (56%), Protestants (53%), and college graduates (58%).

Two in Three Americans Consider Themselves 'Good Neighbors'

A national survey conducted for *The Reader's Digest* by *The Gallup Organization* reveals that two Americans in every three (64%) consider themselves to be "good neighbors."

The survey also indicates that about one-third (31%) of U.S. adults participate in special church activities.

Eight Americans in 10 (80%) are involved in at least one of the seven types of community or neighborhood activities tested. Here is the full list:

Community Involvement

Consider yourself a good neighbor	64%
Participate in special church activities	31
Volunteer for local charities	19
Attend town meetings	14
Attend school board meetings	10
Actively involved in local politics	8
Volunteer for police, fire, etc.	6
None	20
	172*

*Adds to more than 100% because many respondents participate in more than one type of community activity.

Here is the question:

Which of the community or neighborhood activities listed on this card, if any, are you involved in?

Age and education are important factors in community involvement, with substantially fewer younger than older adults saying they are involved in town and school board meetings and local politics, while college graduates are more apt to volunteer for local charities, attend school board meetings and participate in local politics than are their less-educated counterparts.

Westerners, those with annual household incomes of $40,000 or more and residents of rural areas are more inclined to consider themselves good neighbors. Also, larger proportions of women, Republicans and Protestants assist in special church activities.

The results are based on in-person interviews with 1,509 adults, 18 and older, conducted in November 1984.

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PRINCETON RELIGION RESEARCH CENTER
P.O. Box 310
53 Bank Street
Princeton, New Jersey 08542

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